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New York State Is Reshaping Testing System For Schools

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With a system of standardized tests that dates back to the Civil War, New York State was for years considered a national model for how to administer objective, fair and accurate examinations for public school students.

But to a growing number of business leaders and educators, including some of the state's top school officials, the multiple-choice tests favored by New York and other states do little more than measure rote learning. In requiring students to take more tests than most other states, they contend, New York has stunted the learning it seeks to promote.

Sensitive to such attacks but proud of the state's educational traditions, the State Board of Regents has begun gingerly overhauling the testing system that administers more than four million standardized exams each year to students in grades 3 through 12.

Fundamentally New System

"This is more important than anything else we've done in decades," said Thomas Sobol, State Commissioner of Education and the driving force behind the proposed changes. "To say the system served us well in the past might be accurate, but it doesn't any more."

At heart, the Regents are talking about creating a fundamentally new grading system based less on traditional tests and more on new performance measures: oral examinations, group projects and "portfolios" made up of a broad range of student work, from short stories to science projects, quadratic equations to history essays.

And while standardized tests would remain an important part of every student's life, they would be rewritten to include more essays and problem-solving exercises but fewer multiple-choice questions.

The proposed changes are outlined in a report by a 28-member committee appointed by the Regents, who set policy for the state's 718 public school districts. The Regents approved the plan's general principles on April 15, but they must still hash out the thorny details, including new testing programs, curriculums and grading policies.

First Standardized Tests

Under a proposed timetable, the state would develop pilot programs for the new assessment system next year with the goal of phasing it in statewide by the year 2000.

Few things could rattle New York State's proud educational system more than overhauling its testing traditions. The state created the nation's first set of standardized tests in 1865 to assess eighth graders and expanded it in 1878 to test high school students preparing for college.

Today the state's schools are considered among the most test-dependent in the nation. During 12 years of primary and secondary schooling, most students take at least 14 and as many as two dozen standardized state tests. Heavily weighted with multiple-choice questions, those tests are important in issuing final grades, assigning students to remedial courses and granting diplomas.

But a growing body of educators here and around the nation contend that traditional, multiple-choice tests encourage instructors to "teach to tests": focusing classroom work on recurring exam topics while ignoring other important material.

The critics, who include business groups, also argue that multiple-choice examinations, while useful in assessing a student's ability to do certain tasks or remember certain facts, often fail to measure the more complex skills needed for college and work: critical thinking, problem solving, writing and speaking.

"There is a strong consensus that the move toward multiple-choice testing has damaged instruction," said Linda Darling-Hammond, a professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, who is helping New York State develop its new assessment system. "It has reduced the extent of writing, it has reduced the extent of experimentation in project work and it has had a substantial effect on American students' ability to solve problems."

Portfolios, when used in conjunction with tests and other performance measures, are a way to push students away from rote learning, Ms. Darling-Hammond argues.

In portfolio systems, students compile daily work in dossiers that are periodically evaluated by their teachers. Revisions are encouraged, allowing students to demonstrate new learning. And teachers' observations about a student's motivation, ability to work in groups and classroom participation are often part of final grades.

A New Idea for Many

Proponents say portfolios provide a stronger measure of effort, since they can document how students revise work and improve over time. And they can give students a sharper sense of what is expected of them by linking daily work more closely to final grades.

"The positive side of portfolios is that if you really want to improve instruction on a daily basis, you have to focus on the quality of work year round," said Daniel Koretz, a resident scholar at the Rand Institute on Education and Training in Washington, who has studied a portfolio system in Vermont. "Tests often become a substitute for ongoing achievement. They allow you to do badly all week as long as you do well on test day."

Though used by dozens of schools nationwide, including Central Park East Secondary School in New York City and some Scarsdale schools, portfolios are a relatively new idea for most state education departments. Vermont uses them in the fourth through eighth grade and plans to require them in all grades. Kentucky uses them for writing and math in three grades. California and a handful of other states are developing portfolio programs.

As their use has spread, portfolios have received their own share of criticism. Some educators worry that they are less reliable in comparing student work than multiple-choice tests. A poorly managed portfolio system could lead to a patchwork of standards across a large state, some educators warn.

"If they work right, portfolios are supposed to be very, very individualized, so the problem becomes, how do you compare them?" said Eva Baker, co-director of the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing at the University of California at Los Angeles. "There may be a bad rap on standardized tests, but the reason we have them is for fairness."

In Vermont, Mr. Koretz and a team of evaluators found that grading on portfolio assessments varied from school to school. But the researchers also found that teachers generally supported the new system because it gave them greater autonomy over assignments and grading policy.

"The lesson in Vermont is that these things can be a powerful tool," said Mr. Koretz. "But they come at the cost of being able to draw strict comparisons across school lines."

Mr. Sobol said New York can avoid some of Vermont's problems by continuing to administer standardized tests. He said the state would also attempt to insure consistency in certain high school portfolios by mandating what they contain. And he said that all teachers will receive special training in grading portfolios before a statewide system is set up.

Cost is another concern, since grading essays and projects is more time consuming than grading standardized tests. Training teachers for portfolios would cost \$50 million a year, state education officials estimate. And the New York State United Teachers has said the state should reduce teachers' work loads and the size of classes before mandating portfolios, which could create substantial additional costs.

Grip on Grading Policies

Echoing complaints that have been raised in other states, a few Regents say the assessment plan might allow districts to reduce educational standards. They contend that standardized tests give the state a firm grip over grading policies, while portfolios transfer much authority to local schools. While wealthier, high-performing districts might thrive under such a system, poorer ones are likely to suffer, they argue.

"What we're doing here is a great disservice for most urban and rural districts," said J. Edward Meyer, a Regent from Westchester. "The Great Necks and Scarsdales will come out fine because they've been doing their own thing for years, and doing it just fine."

A few school boards and parents, many active in conservative Christian and anti-tax groups, have also raised concerns that portfolios are part of an effort to give teachers greater license to influence students' values. Similar protests have complicated efforts to reshape educational systems in other states, including Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Mr. Sobol said schools already teach civic values such as honesty and respect for others. "Those are the glue of society, and it is a school's duty to teach them," he said. "But we don't want to wean kids from their churches or parents."

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